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SUBJECT: NEXT STEPS ON ELECTORAL REFORM LAWS

REF: A. AMMAN 1364

1B. AMMAN 520

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale, reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary: With the recent passage in parliament of a government budget, attention is turning to Jordan's pending political reform agenda. The King, Prime Minister and Planning Minister have emphasized to us a determination to proceed promptly with the introduction to parliament of bills for the reform of municipal and parliamentary elections, and for political party formation. The King has expressed characteristic exasperation that the process is not moving rapidly enough, while parliament is due to recess at the end of March and does not return until October unless called back for an extraordinary session. The government, however, has not completed drafting the bills and the Prime Minister has embarked on necessary but time consuming consultations with a wide array of stakeholders, in order to secure maximum support for the bills. A senior advisor to PM Bakhit worried that the Islamic Action Front will do well in local polls, but saw no way to avoid this. End summary.

12. (U) Prime Minister Bakhit's political coordinator, Ali Al-Ayed, assessed the government's next steps on three key political reform bills)- municipal elections, political parties, and parliamentary elections -- during a meeting February 27 with poloff.

13. (C) With the recent passage of the GOJ's budget, Al-Ayed said the government was now turning to the three political reform bills. The Cabinet had not yet decided its strategy. While work was moving ahead on some details (see below), Al-Ayed said he had no answer to the conundrum at the heart of political reform in Jordan: how to liberalize political life when, at least in the short run, the clear beneficiary would be Islamists whom Al-Ayed called &anti-liberal.8

Municipal Elections) An Opportunity for Islamists

14. (C) Al-Ayed said the government's latest thinking was to ask parliament to amend the existing municipal governments law to provide for

-- elections in June 2006,

-- the election of all mayors and municipal councilors,

-- except in the case of Amman, where the Interior Minister would appoint the mayor and half the municipal councilors. (Note: Since 2003, mayors and up to half of municipal councils have been appointed throughout the country. Before 2003, only the mayor of Amman was appointed; all other municipal leaders were elected.)

¶5. (C) Al-Ayed added that a politician he did not name was lobbying the PM to grant Irbid an arrangement similar to the one proposed for Amman, but this was & a non-starter⁸, Al-Ayed said. (Note: Irbid's population, like Amman's, is heavily Palestinian-Jordanian. End note.)

¶6. (C) In response to poloff's query, Al-Ayed expected the Muslim Brotherhood's party, the Islamic Action Front, to do & quite well⁸ in many municipalities, and even to gain control of some councils and mayoralties. He acknowledged that the traditional leadership of the Brotherhood and Front were pragmatic, but expressed deep concern at the prospect of Islamist local governments in parts of Jordan. There was no knowing, he said, which factions within the Islamist movement might come out on top in this or that town.

Political Parties Legislation) How to Encourage Centrists?

¶7. (C) Al-Ayed confirmed media reports that the Prime Ministry had been engaged in consultations with some of Jordan's 33 political parties over a new parties, law, but lamented that most of the groups involved in this process were effectively clubs of a few hundred members. The Islamic Action Front, the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm, was the only real party in the country, and he admitted he was at a loss as to how to move toward the government's goal of fostering one or two large liberal, secular parties that could stand up to the Front. He said the cabinet wanted to build a mechanism into any new parties law that would somehow consolidate &rist⁸ parties and prevent them fighting over the same ideological turf. When poloff suggested that electoral competition would winnow out weak parties, Al-Ayed replied that a &natural⁸ shakeout would take too long, and that the Islamists would &clean up⁸ in the interim.

¶8. (C) However the reformed parties law turned out, Al-Ayed expected that no competitive secular parties would have developed in time even for the 2007 parliamentary elections. (Note: The current parliament completes its final session in March 2007, and the present law calls for a new parliament to convene by October 2007. End note). &Maybe in four or five years, if we are lucky⁸ Jordan would develop one or two strong secular parties, he said.

Parliamentary Elections Legislation

¶9. (C) Al-Ayed called electoral law reform & the only controversial part⁸ of the National Agenda reform plan. The Prime Ministry began a &dialogue⁸ in mid-February with civil society, academics, and NGOs to seek a national consensus on electoral reform that was broader than the consultations the National Dialogue commission had conducted.

Al-Ayed said he still had no idea what an electoral reform bill would look like. (Note: Marwan Muasher, the National Agenda report's coordinator, told us (ref B) that he foresaw a &road show⁸ of consultations as the next step for the plan; the dialogue appears to be the first stage of this process. End note.)

Timing

¶10. (C) Al-Ayed said the Prime Minister's latest thinking was to introduce draft municipal and parties bills to parliament in the coming month. Al-Ayed was unwilling to offer a guess as to when a draft elections reform bill might reach lawmakers.

¶11. (C) NOTE: PM Bakhit told the media February 25 that the GOJ would present a new municipalities law to parliament &within days.⁸ He did not state when municipal elections might be held. Minister for Political Development Sabri Rbeihat told press on February 7 that municipal elections might take place toward & the end of the year.⁸ Another factor is the calendar for the Parliament, which traditionally adjourns in late March or early April and

returns on October 1. The King can call an extraordinary summer session of parliament, as he did in 2004 and 2005, but many MPs will likely be unhappy at being recalled. In the 2004 July their displeasure strengthened resistance to several pieces of legislation the government considered priorities. END NOTE

112. (U) Bio note: PM Bakhit promoted Ali Al-Ayed to his new position as political coordinator in early February. He served Bakhit as press coordinator from December 2005 through January 2006. Al-Ayed also worked as a senior aide to Marwan Muasher during Muasher's tenures as Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Al-Ayed served as DCM at the Israeli Embassy in Tel Aviv from late 2004 to November 2005, and for most of that time was Charge d'affaires. Al-Ayed also served at Jordan's Embassy in Washington.

113. (C) Comment: PM Bakhit and the King are intent on moving ahead with reforms despite the doubts of senior aides like Al-Ayed, but the PM wants to gain broad support for the bills) and amend them as needed to do so) before submitting them to parliament. The tight parliamentary calendar means it will be a challenge to push these bills through the Chamber of Deputies without calling an extraordinary session. The Bakhit cabinet will need to make key legislative decisions soon if it is to meet its target of municipal elections under a reformed law by June 2006.
HALE